

Equality and Discrimination: Lessons from a Research Programme and a Conference

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INTRODUCTION

Despite legislation outlawing discrimination across the EU, inequalities between groups appear to be an enduring feature of Irish and European societies. The extent to which inequality is due to discrimination is a matter of continuing debate and controversy. Accurately measuring discrimination is therefore a crucial yet challenging task. This has been a central focus of a research programme on equality and discrimination carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute and the Equality Authority since 2006, and was the theme of the conference 'Making Equality Count' held in Dublin in June 2010. Drawing on economics, sociology and social psychology, the book from the conference, *Making Equality Count*, highlights advances that have been made in the measurement of discrimination, as well as the range of evidence that has been accumulated on this topic in recent decades.[†] Here we give a flavour of the measurement issues and the salient findings from the book.^{††}

MEASURING EQUALITY AND DISCRIMINATION

Inequality and discrimination can be investigated using a range of different methods, each with different strengths and weaknesses. In self-reports of discrimination, survey respondents are asked directly about their experience. The analysis of self-reports can consider experiences of discrimination across the whole population - not just a specific minority group - and can compare self-reported discrimination across a variety of situations. This method has played an important role in tracking change (and stability) in the experience of discrimination. However self-reports are subjective, depending on respondents' perception of their treatment by others.

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A second technique to investigate discrimination compares outcomes (like unemployment rates, pay) across groups and statistically adjusts for non-discriminatory sources of difference like education, skills and experience. Remaining differences are commonly attributed to discrimination. While there have been important developments in statistical methods over recent years that have improved our understanding of inequality, it remains difficult to assess how much of this remaining difference in outcomes is due to discrimination.

The third approach commonly used to measure discrimination is based on attitude surveys of the general population. These investigate attitudes and beliefs about the “out-group”, and more favourable attitudes towards the majority group. While these studies can be informative, especially if well-designed, respondents may be reluctant to express attitudes or opinions that are not socially desirable, such as being prejudiced. Furthermore discriminatory behaviour cannot simply be deduced from attitudes, though these may be strongly related. Other techniques have been developed to bypass attitudes and measure discriminatory behaviour directly through field experiments.

Field experiments can provide direct evidence of discrimination. Instead of measuring attitudes, these studies measure the actual response of employers or service providers to carefully matched candidates who differ only in respect to the characteristic on which discrimination is thought to occur – gender, race, nationality, age etc. These experiments occur in real life situations, for example applications are sent in response to actual job vacancies, and the responses are observed. While these studies can provide powerful evidence on discrimination, they can only be carried out within certain situations (e.g. applications for housing, job applications, accessing services/products, grading) at the initial point of contact, and cannot be used to detect discrimination in other processes like promotions.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Making Equality Count presents selected findings from the Irish research programme and adds international perspectives on equality and discrimination.

People’s Experience of Discrimination in Ireland

In the first paper in the book, Russell and her colleagues present self-reported discrimination in Ireland in a range of social contexts including work and accessing services, using high-quality survey data from the CSO for 2004 representing the whole population. The highest reported discrimination was in recruitment (just under 6 per cent of those who had been seeking work) and

discrimination in the workplace (5 per cent). In services, the highest reported discrimination was in accessing accommodation (4 per cent) and financial services (almost 4 per cent). The authors note that people with disabilities and non-Irish nationals experienced discrimination in a wide variety of contexts. For other groups, discrimination was more context-specific. These results provide an important benchmark for examining changes in the nature of discrimination experience in the future. The survey was repeated in late 2010, and results from this will facilitate the monitoring of reported discrimination patterns in Ireland.

What do experiments tell us about discrimination?

Two papers show how field experiments may overcome some of the difficulties with measuring discrimination by comparing outcomes. Judith Rich presents an interesting overview of the field experiment method and what experiments in the last 50 years have to tell us about discriminatory behaviour in markets. Rich reports that access to jobs was restricted for racial minorities, women, older and obese individuals; access to housing was restricted for racial minorities and homosexuals, and that racial minorities, women and older individuals paid more for products. Rich concludes that it is of concern that the more recent tests (since 2000) report similar findings to earlier studies (starting in the late 1960s), given public concern about discrimination and legislative developments in the area.

In the first experiment of its kind in Ireland, McGinnity and her colleagues tested for discrimination in recruitment against minority groups. The researchers sent out almost 500 equivalent CVs in response to advertised vacancies for jobs in administration, finance and retail sales in the greater Dublin area. They found that candidates with Irish names are over twice as likely to be asked to attend an interview as are candidates with an African, Asian or German name. The discrimination rate was relatively high by international standards, and did not vary across occupation. Interestingly they found no difference in the degree of discrimination between different minority groups, and argue that this may be linked to the recent nature of immigration in Ireland and the lack of established minority groups.

Insights from Social Psychology

The paper by Al Ramiah and colleagues adds insights from social psychology to our understanding of discrimination. Social psychologists are careful to distinguish prejudice (an attitude) from stereotype (a belief) and discrimination (a behaviour). Influential explanations of discrimination discussed include the social identity perspective (the drive for positive social identity can result in discrimination against the out-group) and aversive racism (a group upholds egalitarian norms while maintaining subtle prejudice). The paper discusses ways

in which these and other ideas have been tested. Implicit measures of prejudice have been developed to capture the prejudice that people are unwilling or are unable to express. The Implicit Association Test (IAT) is based on the idea that people make connections more quickly between pairs of ideas that are already in their mind. Yet studies have found that not all individuals who hold negative attitudes go on to discriminate. What is clear is that discrimination may have serious consequences in terms of mental and physical health, self-esteem and underperformance for the minority group.

Race and Discrimination: A US Perspective

In his paper on racial inequality, William Darity describes the widespread perception that the US is a 'post-racial' society, and illustrates this cogently for the general population using survey data. He argues that this perception also permeates much of conventional economics. It does so in two major ways. First, the individual is at the centre of economic thinking - not a racial or ethnic group, or a social class. Second, conventional economic theory argues that market competition drives out discriminatory practice: profits and prejudice are mutually exclusive. Darity's 'stratification economics' research programme was developed in response to deficiencies identified in conventional approaches to discrimination. Evidence from this body of research strongly contradicts the idea that the US has become a post-racial society. In fact Darity argues that a post-racial society is not the ideal, and he calls instead for a 'race fair', not a 'race blind' society.

Evidence on Inequality: Gender and Disability

The final three papers in this book present empirical evidence on differential outcomes across groups, focusing on gender inequality (Gregory); disability (Gannon and Nolan) and the combination of gender and disability (Watson and Lunn). In her review of research on the gender pay gap, Gregory considers recent evidence from OECD countries. Where is the pay gap greatest and what are the mechanisms underlying it? Recent research across the EU which looks at pay gaps for low, middle and high earners has clearly shown that the difference between men and women's pay is greatest for higher earners, supporting the idea of a 'glass ceiling' on women's earnings. The family pay penalty is an important component of the gender pay gap: research in Germany found a significant wage drop following maternity leave; this diminishes with time back in work, although a penalty for work experience foregone remains. In Denmark, on the other hand, the only effect of children on mother's earnings was through lost work experience. Gregory concludes that in a social climate supportive of working

mothers, as in the Scandinavian countries, the pay penalty to maternity leave can be minimal.

Gannon and Nolan summarise a number of research studies in Ireland concerned with how the experience of people with a long-term disability or illness differs from that of other people. The paper considers evidence from a range of areas, including education, earnings and poverty. Using econometric models, the authors found that, after accounting for age and gender, those with a chronic illness or disability that hampered everyday activities were much more likely to have low educational qualifications than those with no illness or disability. They were much less likely to be in employment and also more likely to be in poverty than those with no disability, after accounting for a range of other factors. In conclusion, the authors reflect that designing policies to combat this disadvantage is also challenging, particularly in the current economic climate. Yet the experience in other countries has shown that, given adequate social investment and attitudinal changes, the disadvantage associated with disability can be greatly reduced.

In policy debates on discrimination and disadvantage, the notion of multiple disadvantage has gained considerable appeal, though is rarely tested using data. In their paper using 2006 Irish Census data, Watson and Lunn ask: does membership of two disadvantaged groups increase the risk of a negative outcome? They tested this, examining differences by gender and disability status for four outcomes: risk of low education, labour market participation, unemployment and being in low-skilled employment. They found that the most common pattern was that membership of both groups is associated with less disadvantage than the sum of risks associated with membership of each group separately. There were also some cases where membership of both groups is associated with a level of disadvantage approximately equal to the sum of the two risks. Watson and Lunn conclude that it is difficult to generalise about multiple disadvantage, as results vary substantially across outcomes. Indeed an interesting lesson from their paper is that the notion of multiple disadvantage may be simple but its application to real life data is complex, and may result in unexpected outcomes.

Conclusion

Making Equality Count contributes to the literature on equality and discrimination in a number of ways. Firstly, it demonstrates the different approaches to measurement and highlights their strengths and weaknesses. Secondly, it reviews a wide body of research on equality and discrimination, including recent evidence on Ireland gathered from the Research Programme on Equality and Discrimination. Thirdly, it demonstrates how important the

collection of adequate data collection is for the whole project. Fourthly, it draws out some policy implications of the findings. Policy on equality and discrimination needs to be informed by convincing evidence, and innovative research can provide that evidence.

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^{††}All reports published under the research programme on equality and discrimination are available at:

www.esri.ie/research/research_areas/equality/research_programme_on_equ/